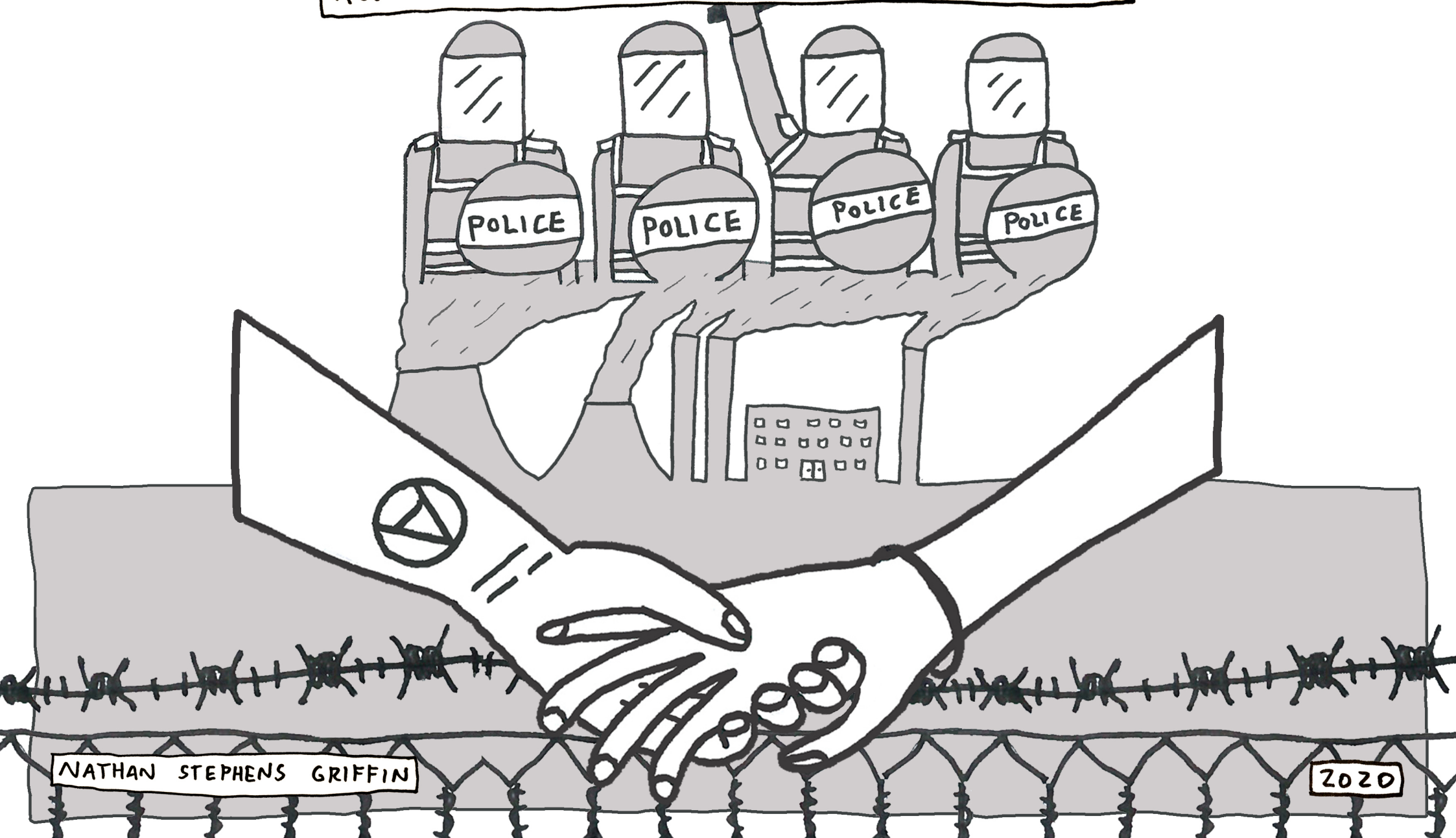


"THIS HAS BECOME OUR POLITICS..."

A COMIC ABOUT RESEARCHING THE IMPACT OF #SPYCOPS

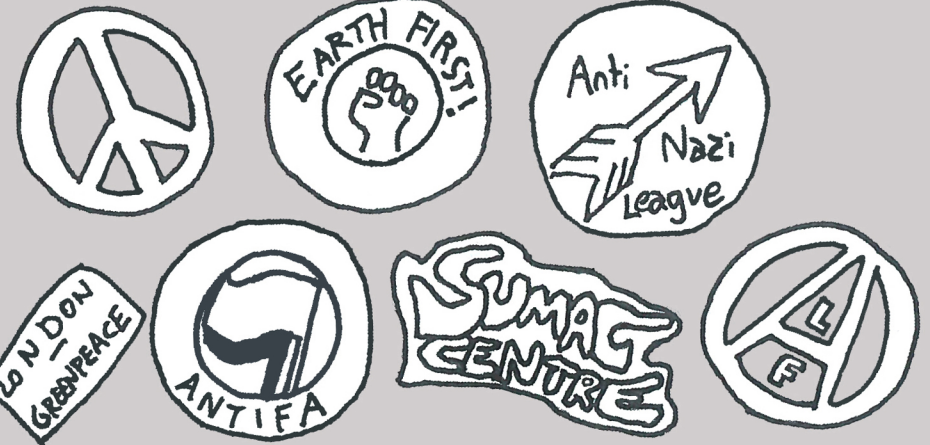


NATHAN STEPHENS GRIFFIN

2020



Between 1968 and 2011, over 150 undercover police officers (spycops) infiltrated more than 1000 political groups in the UK (Evans, 2018).



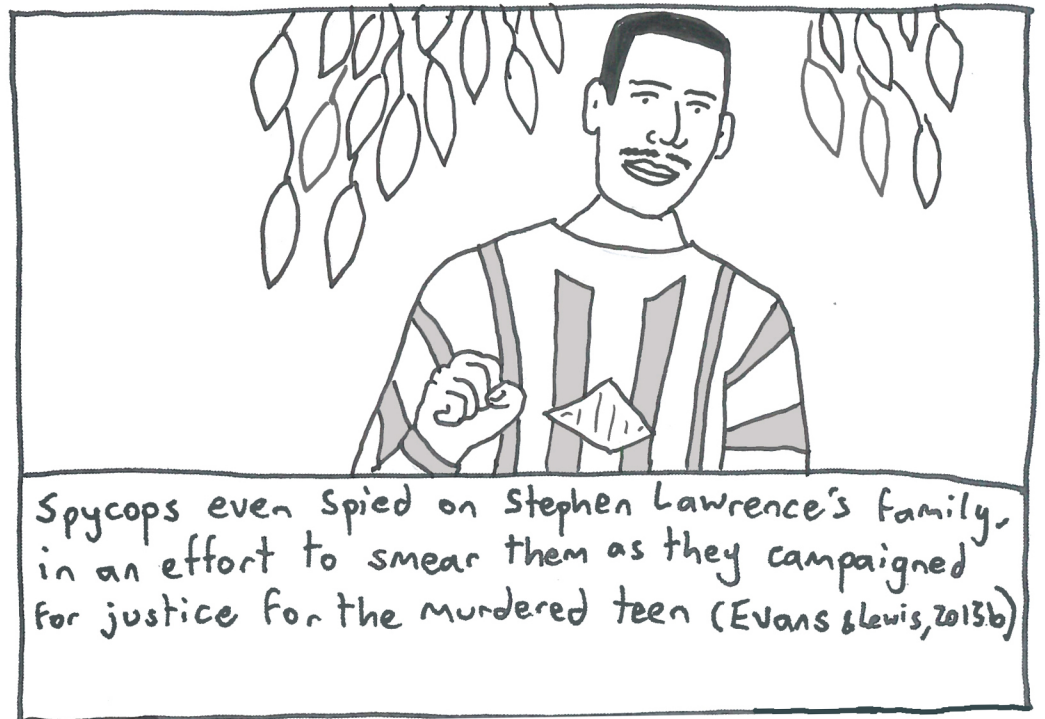
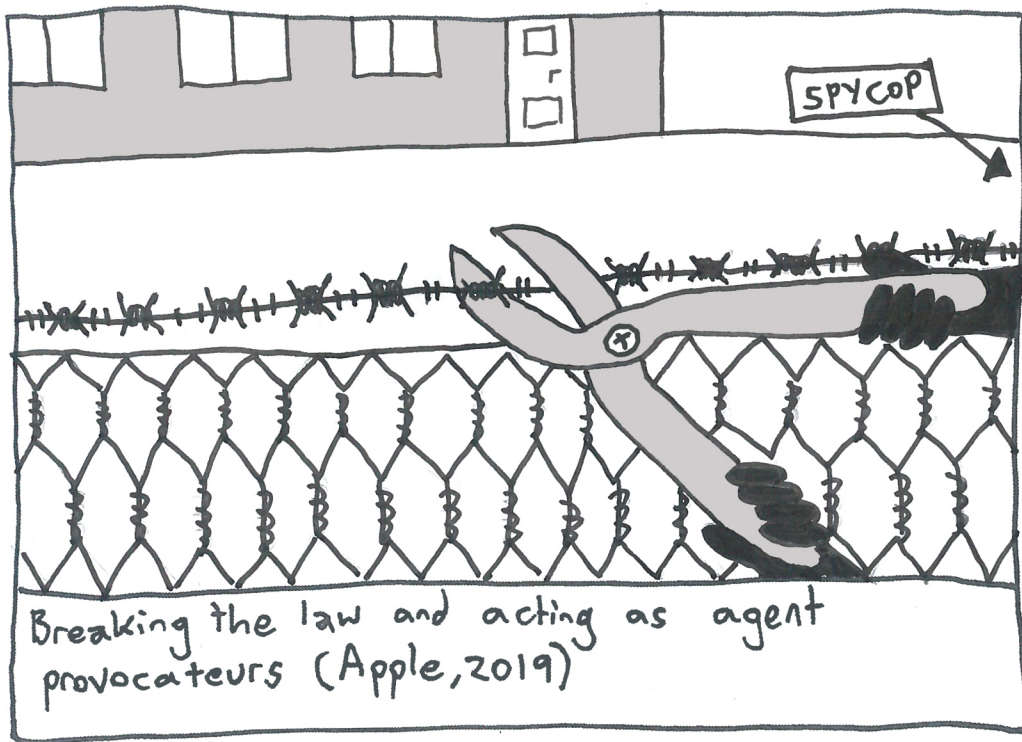
A majority of these groups were left-wing (Woodman, 2018a). There was a clear gender dimension to the harm perpetrated.



Undercover officers perpetrated a range of harmful practices, including deceiving women into sex (Evans & Lewis, 2013a)

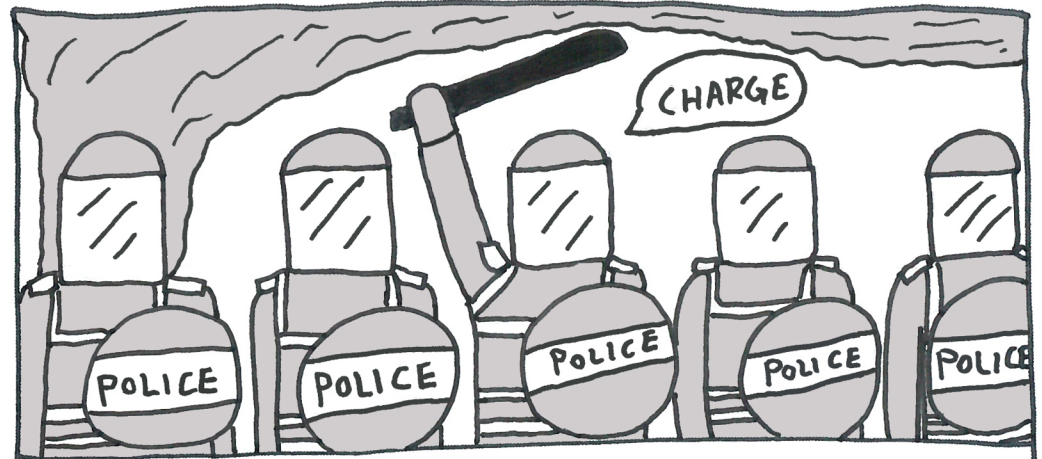


Fatherring children whilst undercover (Evans & Lewis, 2013a)





Critical criminologists have sought to understand crime, policing and social control in the context of structural relations of power in society and the material conditions of capitalism (Taylor, Walton & Young, 1975; Hall et al, 1978; Scraton, 1987).



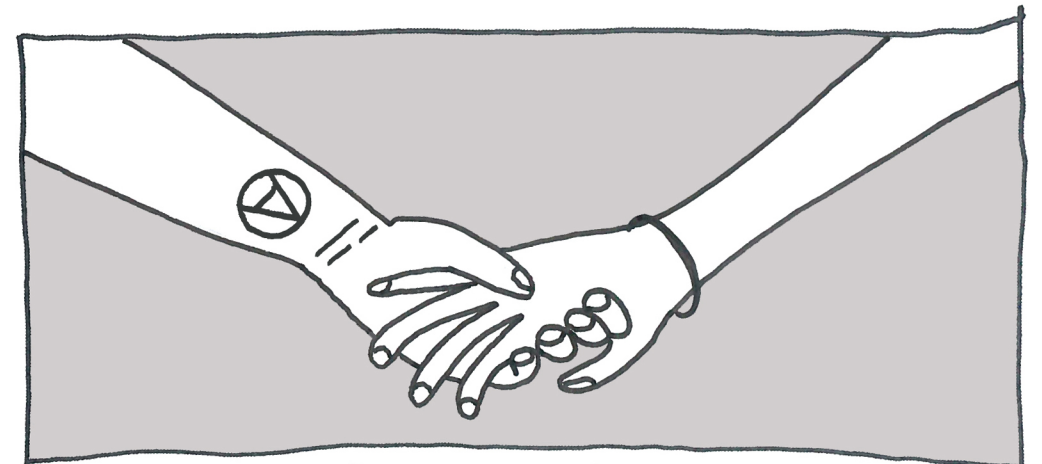
Spycops are part of the longstanding historical use of police, state and private security to disrupt, undermine and repress political opposition in the UK (Choudry, 2019; Woodman 2018a, 2018b)

BREAKING NEWS

DOMESTIC EXTREMISM

Environmentalists charged with conspira

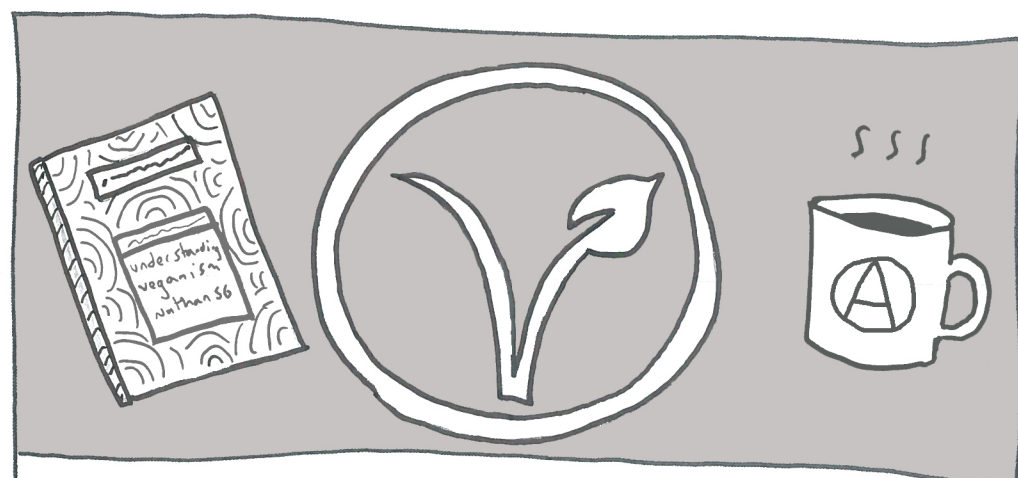
Schlembach (2018) has highlighted the inconsistent and opportunistic use of terms like 'domestic extremist' by police to justify such invasive surveillance.



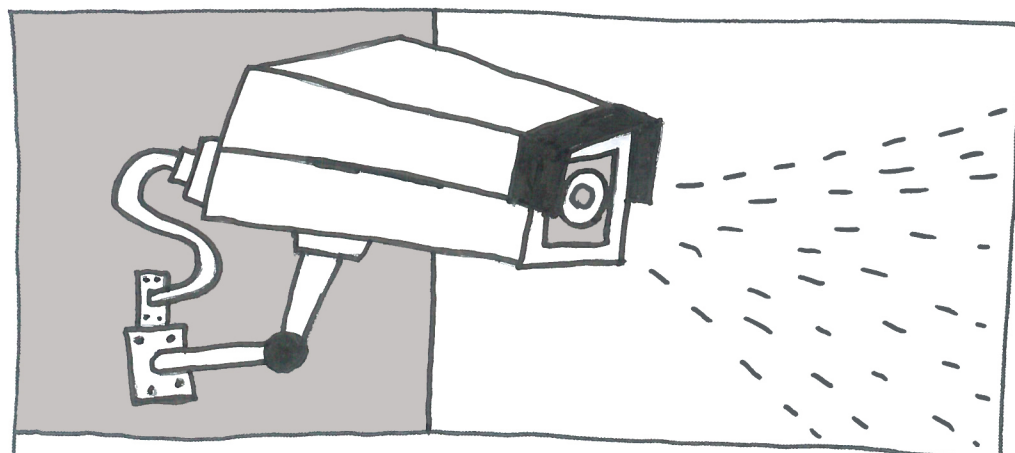
Loadenthal (2014) argues that spycops have destroyed trust and led to inactivity. The use of sex as a means of establishing cover altered "the nature of social bonds amongst communities" (Loadenthal, 2014: 34)



I conducted semi-structured biographical interviews with spied-on activists, in order to better understand spycops' impact on environmentalism in the UK.



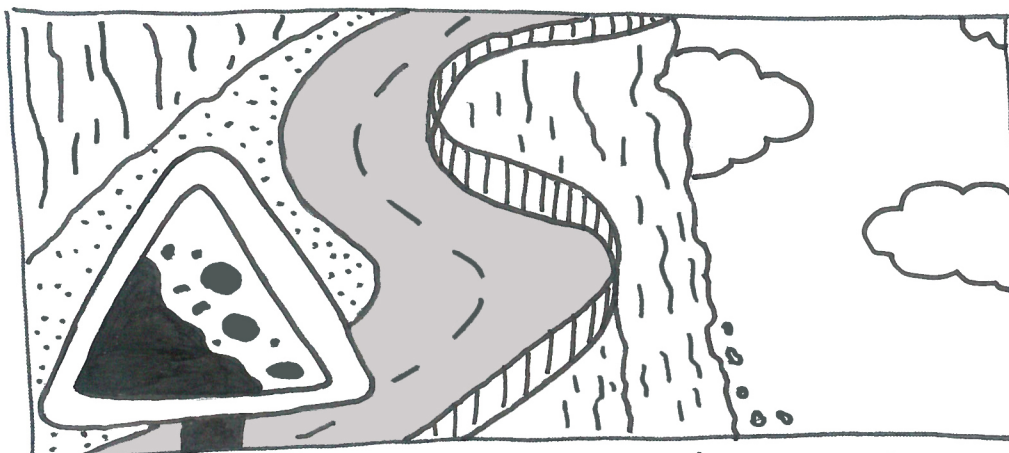
The methods were rooted in an interpretivist, biographical sociological approach (Roberts, 2002). I used similar methods in previous research on veganism (Stephens Griffin, 2017).



Doing research with a community of activists who have been spied on posed distinct challenges in terms of access. So far I have conducted eight interviews.



Whilst some participants had close relationships with spycops, none were themselves deceived into romantic and/or sexual relationships.

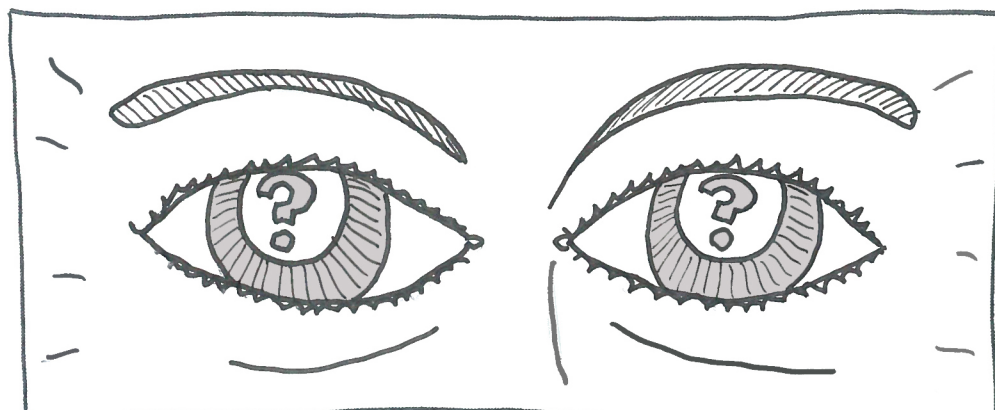


Recurrent through participants' accounts were notions of an insecure, crumbling or fractured reality. I call this 'ontological uncertainty'.

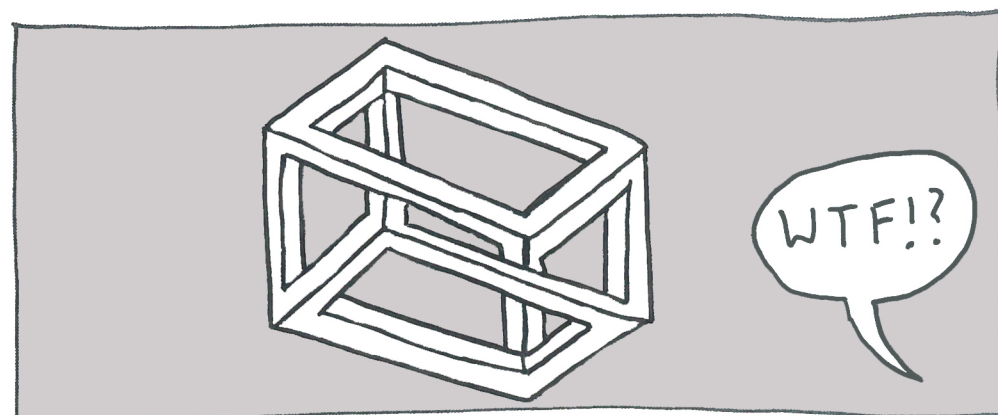


Eli* summarised it succinctly when describing the immediate impact of the revelations in his social circles.

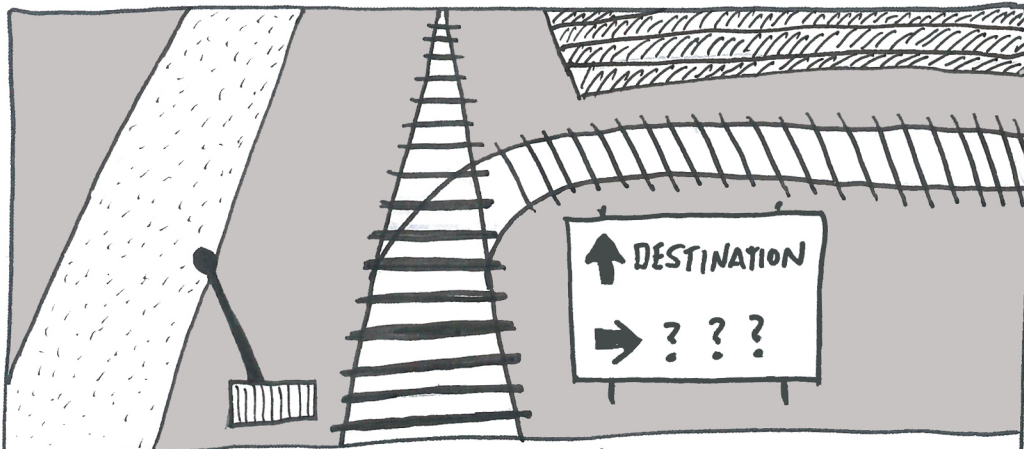
(* Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants.)



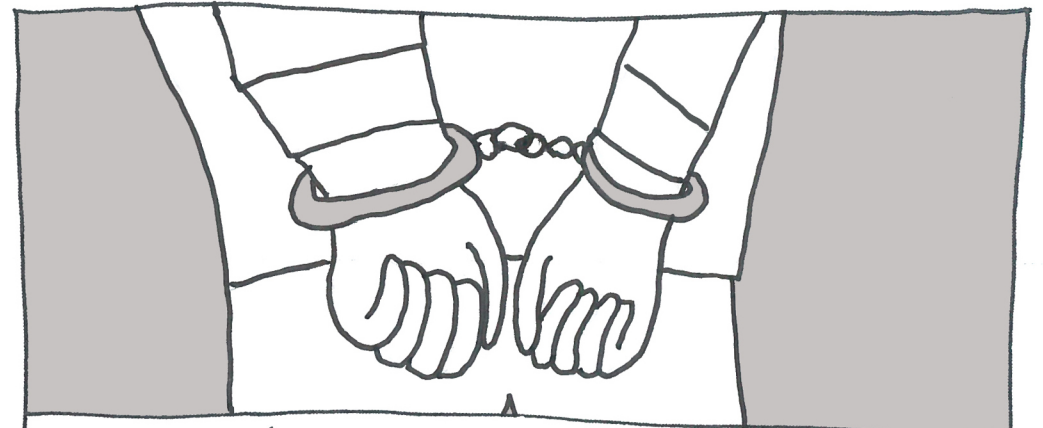
Megan said: "it was completely surreal and it felt like I'd lost... all that connection... Like everything was a little bit gone and weird and changed... [It] made me question the whole reality of it..."



Madeleine said: "it's totally bizarre. It's a really bizarre thing to get your head around... You're just thinking 'what the fuck is going on really?'"



Activists also discussed being diverted from activism due to the actions of spycops whilst undercover, or because of the subsequent breakdown in trust afterwards. I call this 'derailing'.



Ashley said: "Mark Kennedy* was really instrumental in creating a situation where there were loads of people in one place to get arrested".

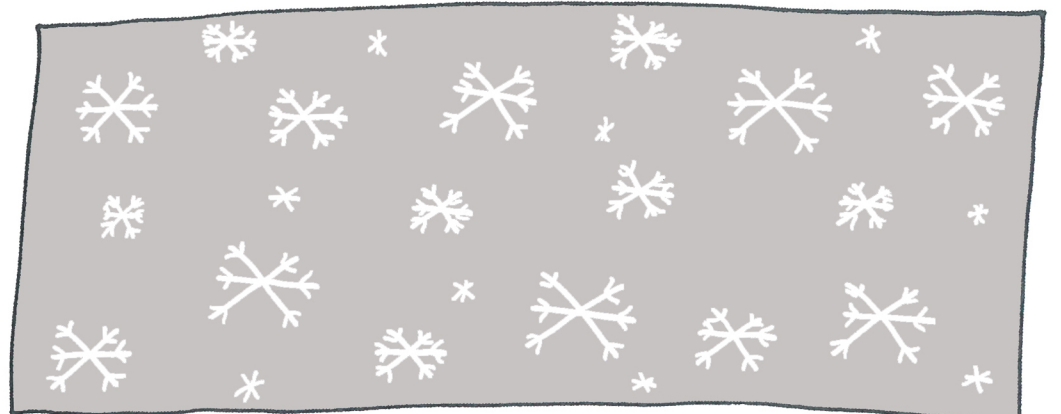
(*Outed Spycop)

"You suddenly see other people being less trusting"



TRUST
NO
ONE!

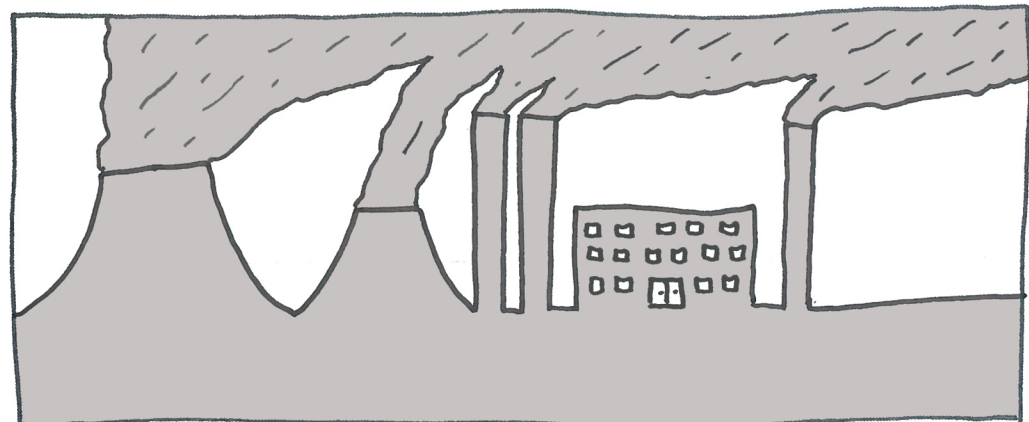
Carol said it was harder to be active after the news broke.



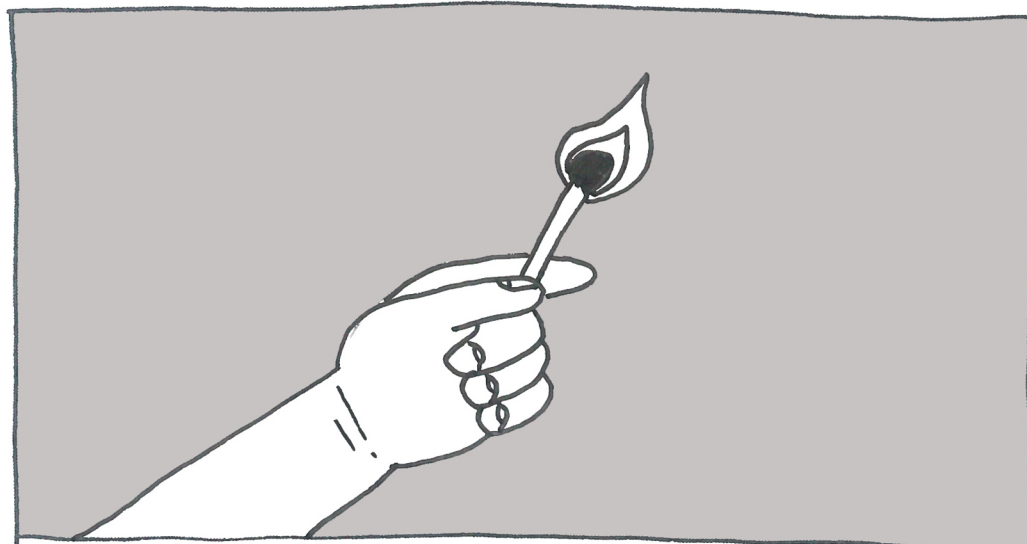
'Derailing' can be understood within conceptions of the 'chilling effect' (Big Brother Watch, 2018; Lovitz, 2010; Potter, 2011). However in some instances, activists were derailed into other forms of activism.



The third theme I identified was 'resilience'. Whilst spycops did derail people away from some forms of activism (e.g. environmentalism), often they took up anti-state surveillance activism.



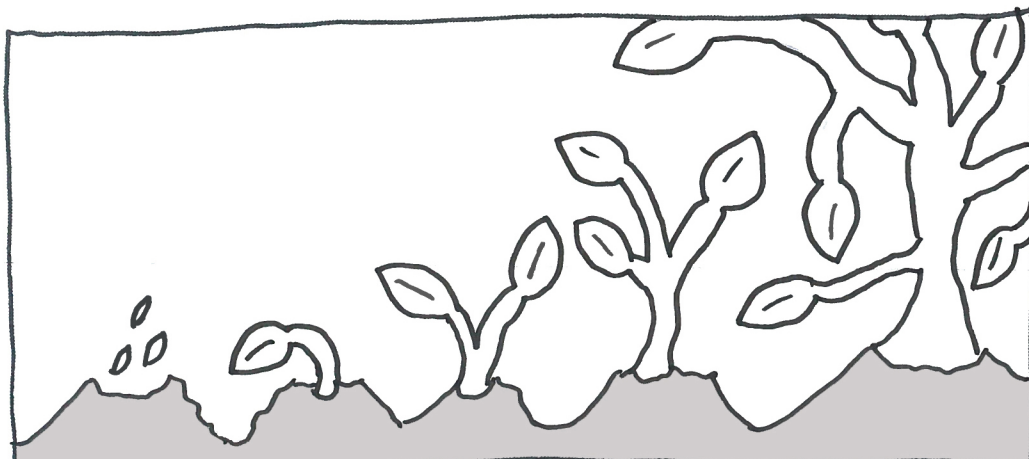
James said: "on a personal level, this has become our politics. It hasn't dissuaded me from doing political stuff, but it has taken over the space I would be doing other political stuff around climate change and animal rights..."



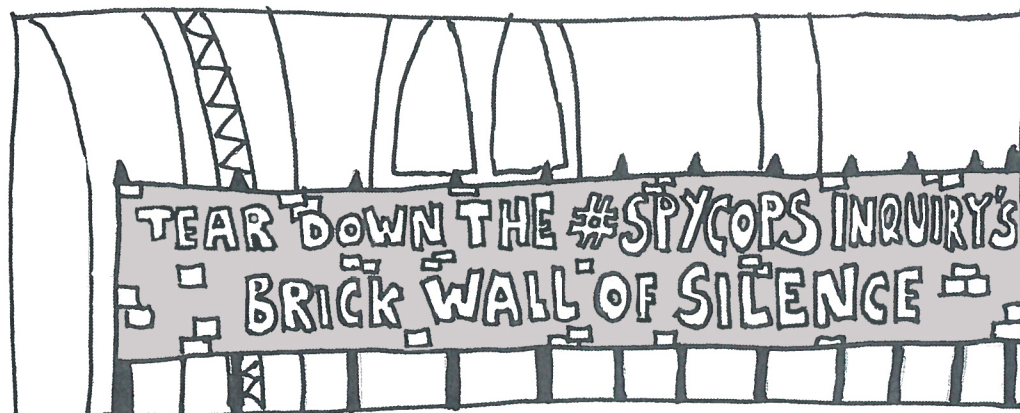
This was echoed in other accounts (including Megan, Carol and Madeleine). This demonstrates a displaced as opposed to extinguished struggle.



Given the profound harm caused by spycops, these narratives offer evidence of the steadfast determination of these activists and demonstrate complex dimensions of impact.



This is a very small unfunded project, but hopefully it helps to better understand the complex ways that spycops impacted environmentalism in the UK.



Activists have displayed resilience in the face of appalling state repression. Many of those affected have diverted their attentions to anti-state surveillance activism, but have been frustrated by the secrecy and slow pace of the Mitting Inquiry.



I hope to continue to do work in this area, and I am working on a paper on the topic at present



With the police having recently placed explicitly cop-friendly groups like 'Extinction Rebellion' on their terror watch list, alongside Neo-Nazis (Dodd & Grierson, 2020), it feels like much more needs to be done to combat the criminalisation of protest.



Hi, it's me,
Nathan

To conclude, I'd like to offer a few auto-ethnographic reflections on my own role in the research



That was the
aim, at least...

I wanted this research to further our understanding of the spycops case and to benefit the activists' cause in some way.

NO
THANKS!



However, one person I approached refused outright and said academics like me are parasitic and self-serving. Whilst this was upsetting, I feel they have a valid point.



LOOKS GOOD
TO ME!

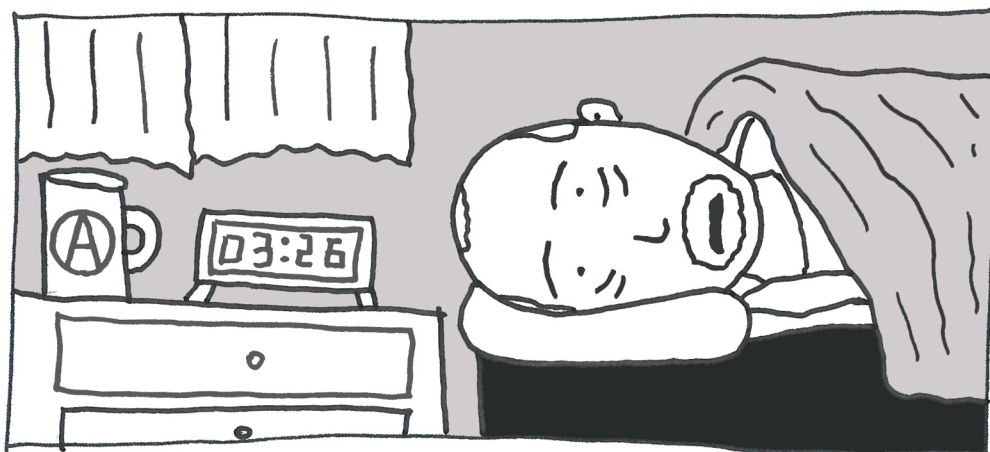
Participants have responded positively to drafts of written work I have sent them. But a voice in my head keeps saying I could use my time differently to help more effectively.



Those of us who aspire to be critical social scientists are often compromised by the conditions of our employment. We have been co-opted as agents of "counter-terrorism" by PREVENT (Zedner, 2018). Neoliberalism predominates.



Universities are now managed based on the logic of capital accumulation, and academics are under immense pressure to do research, not for the common good, but for the business interests of their employers.



I sometimes lie awake at night thinking about what else I might be doing...

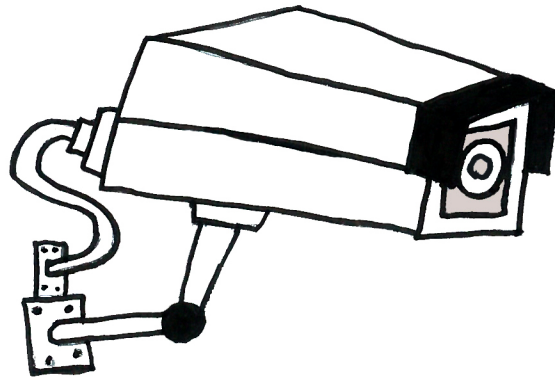


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Massive thanks to the participants for taking the time to share their stories. Thanks also to Paul Jones at the Sociological Review, and to LK ♥.

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Almost all of what we know about spycops is thanks to the work of spied on activists themselves as well as investigative journalists. So...

Please support:

- Police Spies Out of Lives (PSOOL).
- Undercover Research Group.
- Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance (COPS).
- The Network For Police Monitoring (NetPol).
- Big Brother Watch.

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